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ACT Greenhouse Gas Reduction Targets

Sustainable Population Australia (Canberra and Region Branch) welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the inquiry of the Standing Committee on Climate Change, Environment and Water into the issue of targets for greenhouse gas reductions for the ACT¹.

Our submission focuses on two key points of high relevance to the Committee's task. These are:

- the increasing scientific evidence that global warming is happening more swiftly than had previously been thought, and
- the significance of the population growth factor for the task of reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

For many years we in Sustainable Population Australia have seen climate change as one of the most pressing and difficult challenges facing humanity, and made it a major theme of our 2008 National Conference in Canberra². In the year since, there has been a swelling body of expert opinion that global warming is in fact happening at rates close to or even at the upper end of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's range.

This is a very disturbing development indeed, which adds considerable weight to the criticisms that have been made about the adequacy of the Federal Government's target for its emissions trading scheme of a reduction of between 5 per cent and 15 per cent below 2000 levels by the end of 2020. It also makes it obvious that the ACT's milestone of limiting 2025 emissions to 2000 levels, en route to a 60 per cent reduction by 2050³, needs to be revisited. We would assume that the Standing Committee will be taking this into account in developing its recommendations for an appropriate date for the peaking

¹¹ Sustainable Population Australia is a national environmental organisation whose key concern is that issues of population growth and size, and their impact on the environment, are too often left out of policy debate.

² The theme of the Conference, held on 14 and 15 March 2008 at Rydges Lakeside Hotel, was "Population, peak oil and climate change: their impact on the MDGs".

³ See, for example, *Weathering the Change: the ACT Climate Change Strategy 2007-2025*, p8

of greenhouse gas emissions in the ACT, and targets for the reduction of emissions by 2012 and 2020, as required by its terms of reference.

When the Federal Government was criticised for adopting a soft target for its emissions trading scheme, part of its defence was to point out that, because of projected population growth, there would be a much more significant saving in per capita terms. For its part the ACT Government, in *Weathering the Change*, has commented that “Our emissions will be determined by action here, actions nationally and globally, as well as by external pressures such as population growth (our underlining)⁴.

This latter point is consistent with the view expressed by the Chief Minister from time to time that population growth is essentially a consequence of Federal Government policies, including the migration program and policies aimed at promoting a higher birthrate. That is, however, only partially true, for the ACT Government (like the States and the Northern Territory) has consistently pursued growth policies in which population growth has been a significant driver.

One clear recent manifestation of this has been the Come to Canberra campaign. Another – directly relevant to the Committee’s task - can be seen in the the third of the four challenges facing the ACT as identified in *Weathering the Change*. This reads: “Third, we must stabilise rising per capita consumption of energy and, over time, reduce it while allowing for sustainable growth”⁵.

While the growth proclivities of government may lie beyond the Committee’s remit they have high relevance to its task. It is a straightforward matter of arithmetic. Every person produces greenhouse gases. Other things being equal, the more people a country or a region has, the higher overall greenhouse gas emissions will be. It follows that, to reach a given national target in emissions reduction, per capita reductions will have to be even greater⁶. Furthermore, the extent to which a person emits greenhouse gases rises with his or her level of consumption. As the ACT has the highest per capita consumption in Australia, population growth in Canberra will add more to the national reduction burden.

A recent study brings this point into sharp focus. In their paper “Labor’s Greenhouse Aspirations”, in *People and Place*, Vol 16, no2, published by the Centre for Population and Urban Research at Monash University⁷, the Centre’s Director, Bob Birrell, and Senior Research Fellow Ernest Healy, looked at the impact on greenhouse gas emissions of a projected population for 2050 of 31.6 million. Using “business as usual” assumptions which they describe in the paper, Birrell and Healy calculate that, with such a population in 2050, Australia’s emissions of CO2 would be four times the figure aspired to in the Government’s 60 per cent reduction target. (It might be noted in this context that the projected population of 31.6 million for 2050 used by Birrell and Healy is a considerably smaller figure than would be reached if present fertility and net migration rates were to persist⁸.)

⁴ *Weathering the Change*, p25.

⁵ Whether “sustainable growth” is more oxymoron than achievable objective is an intriguing issue, but outside the scope of this paper.

⁶ This is not to suggest that the relationship between population numbers and emissions is a linear one.

⁷ The Birrell/Healy paper is reproduced in the attachment to this submission.

⁸ The recently announced cut to the skilled migration program for 2008-09, it might be noted, still leaves the program at a record level.

Against this background we consider it self-evident that, for the ACT Government and public to be adequately informed about the implications of the emissions reduction targets it proposes, the Committee's report will need to include analysis of the implications of prospective population growth on both overall emissions reduction targets and *per capita* emission reductions.

We would be happy to answer any queries there may be about the points we have raised in this submission. Contact could be made either with myself, on xxxx, or our President, Jenny Goldie, on xxxx.

(Giff Jones)
Branch Secretary